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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the stylistic changes that have occurred since 1850 in short fiction written by women. A shift is noted from the sentimental, romantic, "pretty" writing of the past to today's more realistic writing, with its characteristically vivid imagery. Discussion defines the term "feminist fiction" and shows how today's women writers are using traditional short-story themes and structures that, directly or indirectly, express feminist values. For example, many women writers now employ a writing strategy that stresses reader recognition of situations imposed upon women instead of a strategy of character illumination, in which the story development allows a character to discover her own situation. Examples of the realism and imagery used by contemporary women writers are included. (EL)

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# Feminist Short Fiction: New Forms and Styles

This paper developed from an anthology of feminist short fiction that Professor Myra Stark and I completed recently. Intensive reading in short stories written by women is not the dreary experience some might suppose; in fact women's creative response to the pressures society exerts has resulted in startling uses of traditional materials and remarkable developments in writing style. If style is so essential that it "makes the man" the surprising changes in the style of women's language from the 1850's to the present must reveal a remarkable change in women and in their perception of themselves.

Myra Stark and I did not presume that all short stories written by women were feminist short stories, nor that all stories written by feminists expressed feminist values. We defined feminist fiction as occupied with the struggle of the consciousness that perceives itself as feminine to know and fulfill what it is to be a woman in her full personhood within a society that does not as a whole comprehend what that is.

Not all writers proceed from these assumptions, of course, and many established women writers who might be embarrassed to be praised as feminist have written strong stories that express feminist values. In our reading we found traditional themes of the short story serving feminist interests. In the traditional quest for identity, the man ventured forth and the woman, like Penelope (or unlike her) waited at home for him. In our time the woman undertakes this journey, too, even if it is only through trying to rent a work space outside of her

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home, as in Alice Munro's famous story, "The Office," and the fiction records her effort to move from agonist to protagonist.

The setting of these stories tends to be domestic, fiction that dramatizes the private life. Often the setting is so narrow and the central woman's sphere of action so limited that the story's atmosphere is almost claustrophobic. The stifling inhibition of women's range is shown in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" of 1891 and Ann Beattie's "Downhill" of 1974. In Beattie's New Yorker story, Maria, the central figure, is so dependent upon the "logical and reassuring" Jon that when he goes away she experiences a frightening sense of loss of identity expressed through images of self-annihilation. As Maria wanders alone in the house she fears she may "desappear forever--just vanish while rounding a corner, or by slipping down, down into the bath water, or up into the draft the fire creates." Both Gilman and Beattie perceived the same danger for women: the danger of over-protection that reduces a potentially active woman to dependence, childish timidity, and loss of self-trust.

In many women's stories the device of the ironist is used and the audience perceives more than the characters do. The "recognition," that moment of illumination so common in traditional stories by men, is experienced by the reader more often than the central character. That choice of strategy is a politically significant one. Women writers are imagining and working to create a reader's and thus a society's recognition of the situations imposed upon women. Any writer would agree that that choice of strategy is the more difficult one and that it suggests a healthy sophistication and ambition in women writers to say that roughly twice as many of the stories I read had the reader-recognition pattern instead of the central character-illumination structure.

In the years before the sixties any visitor from another planet who read American and English short stories avidly would presume that almost all women were white and wealthy, heterosexual anglo-saxons. Women did not tend to speak roughly, nor did they menstruate, masturbate, defecate or originate-in fiction. Now the delicate jade icons are shattering from one end of the country to another. Black women like Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, are writing and publishing vivid, vigorous stories. Lesbians are more able to publish than they used to be, although small magazines remain their one genuine outlet for fiction.

Indeed, when a writer of the stature of Margaret Drabble uses menstruation as a central symbol in a story published in Cosmopolitan, we know that a giant step has been taken for womankind. Drabble's store concerns the beautiful, efficient Jenny Jamieson, star of a TV talk show and loyal volunteer on many boards of trustees. She speaks to a girls' school on prize day telling of all the dazzling opportunities open for women. She smiles radiantly and speaks of the future knowing that her husband hates her success, that she is trivialized because she is beautiful and in television, having just realized that the system her sensible ways have supported "was beyond hope." Meanwhile blood seeps into her boots. The complexity that Drabble conveys transcends any easy remarks about women setting aside passivity or adjusting to their so-called biological "limitations." Nor does it do to say this is an unusual case, that Jenny is hemorrhaging because she just went to the gynecologist who poked a bit and thinks she should have an operation shortly. Heroism in men has meant some triumph over the body and the

spirit and it will mean, has meant, the same in women--with a difference. To survive biologically as woman involves testing of courage and acceptance of death as women have always known, even when they have indulged discussions of the hero in the artificial battles of the Iliad, Beowulf, Malory and forward to Hemingway. Drabble's final image of Jenny Jamieson smiling, radiating hope, as the blood drops into her boot is pure grace under pressure. It may be an early example of the literary treatment of heroism as it will involve women being women and not women being heroic in the way men are.

Women writers are taking up new subjects, new sources for their imagery; they are rethinking old themes and using them as they apply to women. The stories, however, are essentially traditional in structure. The authors appear to be more interested in new ways of seeing than in new ways of organizing what they see. Largely realistic and non-symbolic these stories build by selective use of realistic details to a moment of crisis, insight, or revelation. They use logical transitions, sequential time shifts, rarely show much interest in time fragmentation or experimentation in structure or plot. There is satire, irony, discipline, controlled writing, but rarely does one see playfulness or sense a mind at play.

The playfulness there is often appears through the voice chosen for the narrative. In Toni Cade Bambara's story, the black youngster who speaks is all set up with three bags of Havmore potato chips ready to enjoy herself at the movies seeing "Gorilla, May Love":

> So the movie come on and right away it's this churchy music and clearly not about no gorilla. Bout Jesus. And I am ready to kill, not cause I got anything gainst Jesus. Just that when you fixed to watch a gorilla picture you don't

> wanna get messed around with Sunday School stuff. . . . I realize that just about anybody in my family is better that this god they always talkin about. My daddy wouldn't stand for nobody treatin any of us that way. My mama specially. And I can just see it now, Big Brood up there on the cross talkin bout Forgive them Daddy cause they don't know what they doin. And my Mama say Get on down from there you big fool, whatcha think this is, playtime? And my Daddy yellin to Grandaddy to get him a ladder cause Big Brood actin the fool, his mother side of the family showin up. And my mama and her sister Daisy jumpin on them Romans beatin them with they pocketbooks. . .And Grandaddy Vale sayin Leave the boy alone, if that's what he wants to do with his life we ain't got nothin to say about it.

That vivid language portrays the youngster and her life and one can cite other examples in which the voice chosen is vital to the story. Granted that these women are writing well, often brilliantly, they are also toppling a cherised platitude. We are at a new moment in the life of an ancient doctrine about style.

Plato asserted in the Timaeus a doctrine that Boethius passed on in his Consolation of Philosophy and Chaucer followed: "the language we use ought to be related to the subject of our discourse." Chaucer put it this way, citing Plato, "The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede." (Gen. Prol. l. 742.) But for women writers of the past, at least those approved and published by male editors, that doctrine had to be transgressed. Everything had to be expressed in beautiful words. The truth might be ugly but it had to be phrased with elegance or the prose was considered inappropriate and surely unfeminine. The response to Wuthering Heights illustrates that point.

When Wuthering Heights was first published George Washington Peck shuddered in the pages of the American Review in 1848 to think of "young ladies" reading it and cautioned them "against it simply on account of the coarseness of the style." He never considered the author might be female:

> The book is original; it is powerful; full of suggestiveness. But still it is coarse. The narrative talks on in a way that if an attempt to imitate it be ever made in a parlor, the experimenter should be speedily ejected. . . . Setting aside the profanity, which if a writer introduces into a book, he offends against both politeness and good morals, there is such a general roughness and savageness in the soliloquies and dialogues here given as never should be found in a work of art. The whole tone of the style of the book smacks of lowness. It would indicate that the writer was not accustomed to the society of gentlemen, and was not afraid, indeed, rather gloried in showing it. (June 1848,p.573.)

Percy Edwin Whipple writing in the same year in the North American Review had the bright idea that Jane Eyre was written by a brother and a sister. In Jane Eyre he found, "scenes of passion so hot, emphatic, and condensed in expression, and so sternly masculine in feeling, that we are almost sure we observe the mind of the author of Wuthering Heights at work in the text." (Oct.1848,p.357.)

The early twentieth-century women writers like Virginia Woolf and Susan Keating Glaspell, do not shrink from ugliness but portray it delicately;

> Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. . . .She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them.

The strongest words in this passage from Woolf's "The Lady in the Looking Glass" are 'old' 'angular' 'lined,' 'veined,' 'wrinkled,' 'pitiless.' To take another moment in which a woman writer had to describe the ugly truth: Consider the moment in 'A Jury of her Peers,' (published in 1917). The author had to show her readers a bird with its neck twisted, the motivation that drove Minnie Foster to strangle her husband in his sleep.

By implication, by turning away, a gesture, a faltering voice, a shrinking, and finally a statement of observation, but by no direct description is the ugliness of the partly decomposed body of the bird revealed. But women no longer have to write that way to be published. In The Prisoner of Sex Norman Mailer noted this new style: "Impossible to avoid the conclusion. A few of the women were writing in no way women had ever written before." Because Mailer cannot call it a woman's style, he says it is the language of blacks, the language of "prison and junk and the writings on the walls of public bathrooms. . . .Some of the women were writing like very tough faggots. It was a good style." (Mailer, pp.39-40.) The sexism racism, and classism of our society, or some of its members, are undeniable if prose has to be described as that of blacks, prisoners, or homosexuals to call it "strong"; still that is where we have been with women's prose.

The radical change in prose style that women's short stories are revealing suggests no new effort to write differently; rather it suggests that the old sentimental mind-set that kept women writing prettily has simply broken down. The world looks differently to us; we can no longer write charmingly about ugliness. It is quite like Drabble's charming Jenny Jamieson who thinks:

> There used to be, till yesterday, a little knob that one twisted until these people came into focus as nice, harmless, well-meaning people. And it's broken, it won't twist any more.

The new style expresses unwillingness to hide among the old amenities:

> My left hand. How can I describe my left hand? It has gnawed cuticles, a wedding ring grown too large, grave freckles, wormy blue veins, a medic-alert bracelet on the wrist, a scar on the fore-finger where I broke a dish of pickled beets twenty years ago.
>
> . . .

> Yesterday I went to the doctor's. I call him Chiclets for short and for spite. Why do I despise him? Fear, what else? He has wind-colored eyes, furry knuckles, and when he touches you, his hands are deft and contemptuous . . . .Why should a man so lacking in empathy become a doctor? Geld, more than likely, and status. God is in his peer group.

The depth, the recognition of realities in Margery Finn Brown's great story, "In the Forests of Riga," simply prevent the old, graceful euphemisms. But there is no question, and never has been, that women have faced the unsentimental truths in their poverty and childbirth and grinding hopelessness over the centuries. But now they begin to speak in their own voices without the overlay of prettiness they have had to adopt for acceptance.

And in the newest voices, new ones that may never have had to overcome the tendency to palliate ugliness, the prose is more than unsentimental and mature; it is tough and anti-sentimental. It utterly rejects conventions of elegance and grace. In Barbara Barracks' "Pleasure," a grotesque life is forced upon the reader by quick juxtaposition of vulgarities perceived by the eleven year old narrator.

> Pauline smirked from the bridge of her nose as if a bug had crawled up there. And all this time I thought I'd dropped from a hole in the sky as natural as ants in the sugar-bowl; me hollering as Lily chews the end of the TV antenna, lips and noisy teeth making the picture out of whack while Pauline sleeps in the armchair. . . .

She rescues her retarded mother's arm put out the snowy window:

> She didn't feel her hand but I did. So I reached out and pulled it inside; she turned . . . .Her eyes were covered with targets, and empty as if large arrows had been shot into the pupil of each eye.

The violent imagery shocks as hard image is piled upon image, each line shouting, "no one saw my life before I saw it." This author does not fear vulgarity. She has only one aim, to achieve a bright orange

vividness of imagery carrying strong impact, appropriate for her eleven year old's combat with life and to protect her mother.

When some women have achieved this degree of freedom from the old constraints anything can happen. We are indeed standing at the edge of a new continent as Lessing and Rich have said in other terms. There is so much genuine mystery about woman's nature and her possibilities and there is so little interest in cultivating the old romantic mystery that was merely evasion, that we are poised now gathering energies, using talents, practising our crafts and soon, perhaps even now, out of women's culture will come the focused power we have admired in the male culture. We are now well within the current of a new rapid development, old themes being refound and redirected to express woman's experience, new writers, new subjects, new perspectives on old subjects, nothing forbidden, new styles co-existing with the older, more traditional styles and methods, and now the new change in consciousness, the inability to turn the knob any further and the unwillingness to turn it back if one could.

We are living in a time Virginia Woolf predicted in Room of One's Own:

> For my belief is that if we live another century or so--I am talking of the common life . . .and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly as we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality . . .if we look past Milton's bogey, for no human being should shut out the view; if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born.

I believe that Virginia Woolf was describing our moment: that there are women writing now that have the habit of freedom and courage to write exactly as they think, that they are looking squarely at the truths and so-called Truth to discover their reality, that many have long known that there is no arm to cling to, that each of us goes alone. Writers like Atwood, Walker, Godwin, Drabble, Rich, Lessing, Sexton, and Woolf herself have known their solitude and their strength. We are living now in a wonderfully rich period in the history of women's literature, not I think because we are preparing for the advent of the great poet, but because many fine women writers are finding their voices and writing for audiences eager to hear them.

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